

****ATTENTION****

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MUSKRAT



In the State of Washington

The muskrat, *Ondatra zibethicus*, occurs throughout the State of Washington in marshes, ponds, canals, drainage ditches, and marshy borders of lakes. It is a prolific animal, gestation period 28 or 29 days, usually two litters of 5 or 6 young a year (April and July-September).

Its fur had considerable economic value when prices were high enough to make good wages for the fur-trappers. Muskrats are easy to trap and skin, and there is a continuing market for their excellent quality furs. When sufficient care is taken to remove the two musk glands (during skinning operations and the meat is washed well), muskrat flesh is a good food for humans.

The presence of muskrats in farm and ranch ponds often poses problems that are related to damage and safety of dams and dikes.

A knowledge of the muskrat's life-habits, and many years of SCS experience, provide guidance concerning ways to favor muskrats, if desired; or to avoid and control muskrat populations if the owner wishes.

HABITAT

Foods. The muskrat diet is chiefly leaves and roots of aquatic vegetation such as arrowheads, bulrush (hardstem and river), bur-reeds, cat-tails, elodea, and potamogeton. Muskrats also forage on alfalfa, clovers, corn, and garden crops growing near muskrat habitat. Though they eat crabs, crayfish, mussels, snails, and fresh fish carrion, such animal-foods are strictly minor.

Cover. The muskrat is semiaquatic and needs water in which to live. Its houses are of two types. In marshes, the muskrat builds dome-shaped mounds or "lodges" of vegetative materials and mud, high enough to keep their living rooms above high-water levels. In dams, dikes, and banks, they tunnel upward into the soil and make dens that remain dry. For both house-types, the muskrat entrance or entrances usually begin 4 to 16 inches beneath the water, near the lodge or shore.

Damage to dams and dikes is caused by the tunneling. The habit is to burrow upward from the entrance, leaving a roof of 4 to 16 inches overhead. The roof may cave in, especially where livestock are permitted to trample the dam or dike.

TO AVOID OR PREVENT DAMAGE

Dams and dikes that are built to SCS specifications, or the equivalent, seldom sustain serious damage even though muskrats have been present for many years. The burrows seldom exceed 8 or 9 feet in length. Therefore, a top width of 10 feet or more, and a dry freeboard-height of 2 feet or more above water-levels, prevents tunneling through the structure. A sod-covering usually prevents a cave-in to the tunnels and dens.

An occasional cave-in which is, of course, unsightly, can be filled in more easily than repeated removal of muskrats.

On the other hand, any narrow, saturated dam, levee, or dike is frequently cut through--and allows water to trickle through the structure.

Muskrat-proofing material on the face of dams and dikes is usually impractical. Aluminum and steel netting, such as hardware cloth and poultry netting are expensive and deteriorate rapidly. Rock riprap is also expensive. The most practical barrier is sheets of asbestos-cement, placed vertically in the fore part of the dam, to the depth of water-saturated soil. This fairly expensive barrier may be installed before or after damage has become serious.

Poisoning. Muskrats may be killed by feeding them apples, carrots, corn, peanuts, or potatoes that are treated with "warfarin". It is mixed at the ratio of 1 part warfarin with 20 parts of bait. The pond owner should ask the Washington Department of Game and Fish for permission to use poison baits.

Several feedings over a period of a few days are required to kill muskrats. The bait should be placed on wooden platforms 24 x 24 inches, covered with a hardware-cloth screen 24 x 24 x 10 inches, and located out in the pond, usually on a post or floats. A 6 x 6 inch entrance is needed.

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Trapping has two useful purposes: (1) Harvesting the useful annual fur crop, and (2) keeping the population at a moderately low level which reduces damage to structures and food supplies.

Muskrat pelts are "prime" (most valuable) from November to March. Pelts are of poor value and largely wasted if taken earlier or later than the above dates. Steel traps, numbers 1 and 1-1/2, are generally used for muskrats. "Stop-loss" traps are best. Traplines should be visited each day.

Traps are usually placed in the mud of a trail or entranceway to the house. The trap is secured by its chain to a slender pole so the animal cannot escape. For further details concerning trapping, skinning, and preparation of high-value pelts, Circular 18 Muskrat Production and Management, may be obtained from the Superintendent of Documents, U. S. Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.